VOL. 1, NO. 7 OCTOBER 29, 2001
SOCIALWORK today
THE NATION'S ONLY BIWEEKLY NEWSMAGAZINE FOR SOCIAL WORKERS

SPIRITUALITY AND RELIGION IN SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

By Rabbi Moshe ben Asher, Ph.D.*

Over the past two decades there has been expanding exploration of spirituality and religion in social work, although they remain largely on the periphery of the profession's educational enterprise and mainstream practice.

Why have social workers shown increasing interest in spirituality and religion?

The root reason may be that our modern society, with its demands that for many are psychologically and emotionally overwhelming, plus its virtual displacement of community and family, has created myriad conditions of life that are spiritually and religiously shattering.

Moreover, growing numbers of congregational clergy of all religions and denominations, responding to their members' needs for counseling and therapeutic care, have sought secular education and training that would enable them to provide psychological and emotional treatment. They in turn have had a spiritual and religious influence on the individuals and institutions—including social workers and schools of social work—that have educated and trained them for such practice.

Recognizing Spirituality and Religion

My social work education and training ignored the spiritual and religious dimensions of practice, which probably corresponds to the experience of the majority of the profession's practitioners. As a social worker and social work educator, however, I know that practitioners in the field have increasingly recognized spirituality and religion as important variables in the lives of those who are the profession's beneficiaries—whether casework or group work clients, residents of a neighborhood, members of a religious congregation or cultural community, constituents within a government jurisdiction, employees of a corporation, or a network of allied professionals. It was certainly a significant recognition in my own life as a professional community organizer.

One night in San Francisco about 20 years ago, I was riding in a car with another organizer and two middle-aged African-American women who were leaders in our organization. One woman consistently punctuated her comments with the phrase, "Praise God"—which struck me as inane at the time. Within six months I had come to reflect on the fact that, overwhelmingly, the lives of the people with whom I had been working—virtually all low- to moderate-income people of color and working-class ethnic whites—revolved around their religious and spiritual beliefs. Their first organizational loyalty was to their church, whether for religious, spiritual, social, cultural, educational, political, or economic reasons. What was inane was that I, along with the majority of my colleagues, was ignorant not only of what religion and spirituality meant to them but in my own family's tradition as well. How in the world, I asked myself, could I be useful to them in making long-extended life changes? Of course, I couldn't—which was the impetus to my becoming a rabbi and significantly increasing my understanding of spirituality and religion. Subsequently I came to work within the field of interfaith congregational community organizing, which since then has evolved into one of the most noteworthy arenas of grassroots community organizing.

It's certain that once we begin to consider the role of spirituality and religion in the lives of our profession's beneficiaries, soon after we're going to

* Moshe ben Asher and Khulda Bat Sarah are the Co-Director of Gather the People, a nonprofit organization that provides education and training resources for Torah-Inspired Community Organizing and Development at https://www.gatherthepeople.org. Moshe formerly taught at California State University, Northridge; California State University, Dominguez Hills; California State University, Los Angeles; California State University, Long Beach; California State University, Hayward; and California State College, San Bernardino.

begin having insights into how we can intervene more effectively. Thus, the social work role relative to spirituality and religion may move from one that is largely passive to one that is proactive.

My experience forced me to conclude that any model of generalist practice that does not incorporate a conception of the social worker's role, responsibilities, and resources relative to a beneficiary's spiritual and religious interests does not address the totality of the beneficiary's capacity. Inevitably it will fail to help the beneficiary reach full potential. It makes no difference whether the beneficiary is an individual, a couple, a family, an organization, a community, an institution, or even a society.

Definitions of Spirituality and Religion

It's useful to clarify what we mean by "spirituality" and "religion" before thinking specifically about how they might be incorporated in our practice.

The dictionary defines spirit as: animating force; incorporeal consciousness, i.e., lacking material form or substance, intangible [out-of-body experience]; heavenly mindedness; and that which "belongs to the church"—none of which is terribly helpful.

In my work with people who have said they were seeking or had a spiritual experience, they were usually referring to one of two things. Typically, they were talking about (1) a feeling or experience of unity or closeness with God or whatever they regarded as eternal and transcendent, or (2) a feeling or experience of lightness or joy, absence of mundane consciousness, and diminution of anxiety and fear.

Israel Salanter, a nineteenth century rabbi who possessed what nowadays we would regard as "mind-blowing" spirituality, wrote: "Spirituality is like a bird: if you hold onto it tightly, it chokes; if you hold onto it loosely, it escapes"—which sounds like a very tricky business. Possibly he was trying to teach that the experience of unity with God is not something to be achieved casually but requires disciplined learning and practice.

How then do we define "religion"?

Religion may be understood sociologically as a formal set of beliefs, doctrines, laws, practices, rituals, and assignments of authority, which are linked to an explanation of the creation and governance of the universe. They are accepted by their adherents as directly or indirectly divine in origin. Religion also entails the formation of one or more federated communities in which the commonweal is thought to be the result of shared thinking and action that revolves around acknowledgment of God, some other "higher power" (which we know from 12-step groups, although the reference here is to power that is strictly "other worldly"), or a set of principles thought to govern and sustain creation.

The basic definition of "religion" is *to bind*, in the sense that we are bound to the promises we make. So, it is that virtually all religions seek to bind their members or followers to vows or covenants of acceptance. These vows embrace acceptance of authority, acceptance of belief systems, and acceptance of definitions of appropriate individual and collective behavior.

Religiosity typically involves awe and fear of God, usefully understood as continuously keeping or failing to *keep God in mind*. This is not analogous to a small child's fear of a parent. Awe stems from *constant consciousness* of the power of God or whatever one calls the creative power in the universe, which produces a sense of respect, reverence, and wonder inspired by the genius and beauty of this power, which is far beyond one's own powers. Fear is a consequence of the *failure to remain conscious* of God or the creative power in the universe—that is, the failure to continually recognize that the creation operates by certain rules—with the result that one anticipates suffering damaging or even destructive consequences. (Dive into the deep end of the pool and "forget" for five minutes that the creation requires you to move your arms and legs—see what happens. Seek to make a living by repeatedly holding up 7-11 stores—see what the creation has, so to speak, in store for you.).

What's the connection between spirituality and religion? Why do most "spiritual seekers" become followers of religions or members of religious congregations?

The answer is a variation on the theme of "spirituality is like a bird." As strange as it sounds at first blush, it takes discipline and organization for most people to achieve spirituality—so we have religions and congregations.

There are endless examples of religion "disciplining" spirituality to better effect through the use of ritual, which is a word that's terribly misunderstood and has an extraordinary amount of contemporary baggage, usually denoting empty and meaningless activity to those who are religiously uneducated and unpracticed.

To better understand the purpose and power of ritual in religion, imagine that you have a new client who says: "I want to take better care of myself and quit smoking, but I'm having a tough time, and I'm getting advice all over the map on what to do. The nurse in my doctor's office says I should use 'the patch'—it worked for her—but I want to get away from the nicotine in one fell swoop. One of the guys on the assembly line, he's into Zen Buddhism, says I should try meditation—that worked for him—but it's too strange to suit me. My pastor at church says I should pray for strength to overcome the craving, but I don't have that kind of faith. Now my uncle says I

should organize an all-day hike up Mount Whitney, and take as many relatives and friends as I can get to come with me. He says that when we get to the top, I should tell God and everyone else who's there that I'll never again poison myself or other people with cigarette smoke, because we're God's creations. His idea kind of intrigues me, but I'm leery about all the time and energy it would take."

It's obvious that the quality and impact of spiritual experience is likely to be intensified by the ritual of an all-day climb and, on the mountain top, making a vow to God and all those near and dear—precisely because of the investment required.

Religious rituals are investments through which we symbolically communicate with ourselves about what we value and how we are to act to protect those things and, as such, they play a crucial role in nurturing and sustaining spirituality.

Social Worker's Spirituality & Religiosity

What's the connection between *our* spiritual and religious convictions, or lack of them, as social workers, and those of our profession's beneficiaries? Is there a potential interaction between our spiritual and religious energies and those of the people with whom we're working?

The answers to these questions depend on how we answer a number of other questions about our spirituality and religiosity. Do we have spiritual experiences? What do they feel like? What are their causes? How do they affect our day-to-day attitudes and actions? Do we most often feel spiritually empty or full? What does that feel like? How do we account for that condition? Do we have a religion? Do we belong to it or does it belong to us? Is it a source of emptiness and enervation or meaning and fulfillment for us? Does it alienate us from people or give us a role in a community we value? How does it affect our day-to-day attitudes and actions toward other people?

We shouldn't be surprised if we don't have answers to all these questions—but we should be concerned. For many reasons we may not have thought about these things before. We may have so few religious and spiritual experiences that "it's all Greek" to us. We may have had so many that we take them all for granted and never analyze them. In any event, if we're working mainly with low- to moderate-income people, the likelihood is that most of them will have active spiritual and religious convictions and commitments. The continuities or discontinuities between our own spirituality and religiosity and that of our profession's beneficiaries will determine how much we can help them realize their full potential.

My guide in this regard is a matrix of intervention possibilities based on one's spiritual and religious posture as a social worker vis-à-vis beneficiaries who are spiritually and religiously energized. The intervention possibilities with beneficiaries who are bereft spiritually and religiously are much more complex, something to be explored in a more extensive article.

The matrix is based on a learning model in which it is assumed that, at any moment, there is one learning partner who is more knowing and one who is less knowing, with three "intervention" options open to the more knowing partner:

- Ask a question, which assumes that the momentarily less-knowing partner has *extensive resources* of all kinds (intellectual, cultural, psychological, emotional, social, biological, and certainly spiritual and religious);
- Propose options, which assumes that the momentarily less-knowing partner has *moderate resources*; or
- Make a statement, which assumes that the momentarily less-knowing partner is almost entirely *without resources*.

The matrix also reflects my personal experience: when my life was entirely secular, I was limited to *raising questions* about spirituality and religion; when I began to develop a spiritual life, I was able to *propose options*; and with the advent of my religious life, I have been able to *direct actions* (when warranted by an individual's lack of resources).

	Practitioner's Spiritual and Religious Posture and Intervention Options with Beneficiaries		
Interventions	*Secular*	*Spiritual*	*Religious*
Raise Questions	✓	✓	✓
Propose Options		✓	✓
Direct Actions			✓

What's the obstacle that prevents many social workers from directly helping their profession's beneficiaries achieve spiritual and religious fulfillment?

Our normative assumption as social workers is that, of course, spirituality and religiosity are important. We believe that if we skillfully and sensitively apply our theories, principles, and methods of casework, counseling, therapy, group work, community organizing, planning, and even administration, we can help people find spiritual and religious fulfillment. Alternatively, we believe that the pastors, priests, imams, rabbis, or other spiritual guides of our profession's beneficiaries can be helpful to them in that regard.

Both propositions are true, but they nonetheless unnecessarily stultify practice by keeping spiritual and religious knowledge and skill out of the social worker's professional toolkit.

One may have a number of negative reactions to the idea of incorporating some proactive form of spirituality and religion into social work. Concerns and considerations that may ameliorate them include:

- It crosses over a boundary into what's defined as sacred, and we are secular professionals—although virtually all religions, contrary to popular understanding, seek to integrate the sacred into daily life.
- It crosses over a boundary into what's defined as another professional realm, clergy, and we are professional social workers—yet in historic time, decades and centuries, professional boundaries are constantly shifting and reforming, as the current movement of clergy toward counseling and therapy demonstrates.
- It crosses over a boundary into an area that's not of professional interest to us—but the hallmark of professional practice is continual self-criticism that leads to lifelong learning for the sake of becoming more helpful to one's beneficiaries.

Spirituality and Religiosity in Practice

It may be useful at this point to consider an example of incorporating spirituality and religion in social work practice.

The ability to experience faith and hope is a very large part of fulfillment and contentment at any particular moment in life. From year to year we face losses and disappointments; we have to deal with grief and failure. Common sense, confirmed by research and clinical findings, tells us that we're better able to get through difficult times if we have faith and hope. All other things being equal, more faith and hope result in:

- Fewer hospitalization days
- Fewer days in jail or prison
- More days in school
- More days on the job
- Fewer suicides
- Less spouse, child, and elderly abuse

So as social workers we ask ourselves, what kinds of interventions might we initiate to promote faith and hope? But first we have to answer the question, how are we to understand what faith and hope mean to our profession's beneficiaries?

To comprehend those meanings requires that we understand what faith and hope mean to *us*, either in terms of our personal experience or what we have been taught religiously. Deep reflection and self-assessment are necessary.

Sociologically, beyond our personal experience, we can identify at least two competing kinds of faith, which are ideal rather than pure types. One type of faith is externally directed and the other is internally directed. The *external faith*, one that we can reasonably characterize as *conscious confidence* or trust, is that if we satisfy the conditions established by our religion, God will act lovingly and compassionately to provide for our needs. This is mostly faith in *God's responsibility* or ability to respond. The *internal faith* can be thought of as an *internalized conviction* or motivation (i.e., not in the conscious mind yet usually played out in action) regarding the possibility for good to emerge in the world, despite one's consciously recollected reason and experience to the contrary. This is faith in *our responsibility* or ability to respond.

Both types of faith regard the capacity for goodness to have been created by God or a higher power. The external type of faith reflects a belief that God has created within us the wherewithal to believe that *God can act* in ways that are entirely outside of our reason and experience. Here "leap of faith" means we set aside our reason and experience to believe that God will create greater goodness in the world. The internal type of faith reflects a belief that, because of what God has created within us, *we can act* in ways that are entirely outside of our reason and experience. Here "leap of faith" means we allow ourselves to create greater goodness in the world even though our reason and experience reject that possibility. Most of us experience these two types of faith to a greater or lesser degree; they're not mutually exclusive.

As with faith, the beginning place to understand hope is to ask what it means to *us*, either in terms of our personal experience or what we have been taught religiously.

Sociologically, we might identify hope as the palpable feeling that goodness is going to emerge in the world—the uplifting, even joyful experience of anticipating things to come. Hopefulness is largely a matter of affect rather than cognition, feeling rather than thinking. The opposite of hopefulness is despair and depression, which are common symptoms in those we seek to make our profession's beneficiaries.

What are the connections between hope and faith?

With external faith, we become more hopeful to the extent that our confidence in God's action is borne out by events, although we can sustain hope by prayer despite discouraging outcomes. With internal faith, sometimes we fail to recognize this faith *as* faith, and thus we fail to act on it. That is, although inexplicably we feel motivated to act for the good, maybe even taking first steps, when we begin to reason and recollect our experience we decide that we must be "out of our mind" to continue. But if we don't misunderstand our faith and instead allow it to operate as a stimulus, its manifestation in our action for the good is the most important reinforcement of our hopefulness. So every completed act for the good that

we experience through our own behavior gives us greater hope that good will emerge in the world. To the extent that we choose to associate with other people who are also acting for the good, avoiding people who are not, we further stimulate and reinforce our hopefulness.

Just as we've begun to consider how faith and hope may operate and thus be relevant to social work, we might also explore prayer, ritual, sanctification, and a variety of other components of spirituality and religiosity.

What's a Social Worker to Do?

What's the connection between "healing" in the psycho-emotional therapeutic sense and a social work beneficiary's experience of faith and hope? (For the sake of brevity, I'm simplifying the subject matter by not examining the biological and social impacts of faith and hope.) Are these concepts and issues appropriate grist for the social work mill? How do these understandings fit within the traditional patterns of social work?

Consider a client who says, "I recently had a heart attack and I'm scared stiff." We may then imagine that, undoubtedly, a number of unspoken questions are troubling this person—to wit:

- What does it mean that my life might end at any moment?
- Why is this happening to me now?
- Who will love and care for my family if I die?
- What happens to me, to my soul, after I die? (And what is the soul?)
- How should I feel after having failed at so many things in life?
- What was the meaning of my life?

As we listen to the client, we may be asking ourselves: Should *I* address the questions that seemingly aren't getting expressed? If so, *how* should I deal with them?

Our first inclination may be to refer the client to appropriate clergy. But if we consider the spiritual and religious dimensions of these questions, we inevitably encounter their more conventional therapeutic import. We come to appreciate that the *implicit* issues presented to us by the client: "Am I lovable and loved?" and "Is the world always a cold, cruel place?"—which demand the inseparable application of both traditional social work knowledge and methods and those of pastoral counseling and prophetic visioning. Incidentally, on the spiritual and religious side, faith and hope are essential in finding answers to such questions.

If we hold ourselves out as generalists, *complete practitioners*, professionally mandated and prepared to deal with virtually every kind of bio-psycho-social challenge, on what basis do we claim ignorance and incompetence in matters that are connected to spirituality and religiosity? One possible answer is that for indefensible or inexplicable reasons we have allowed ourselves to remain ignorant and incompetent in such matters—which is a state of affairs that should not be rationalized but remedied with all possible speed.

Social Work & Citizenship in the "Image of God"

One of our greatest concerns about making religion and spirituality an integral part of social work is the possibility that some practitioners will impose their beliefs on the people with whom they are working, both beneficiaries and colleagues. One can imagine a triumphalism in which a social worker acts as if he or she has been exclusively entrusted with insight into the "divine will." (Such assertions, ironically, do not necessarily reflect belief in a higher power, the equivalent of conventional recognition that one is subject to God's will; often they are based on a belief in one's own power, that one can manipulate God for one's personal purposes.)

This danger of imposing our personal spirituality and religiosity accompanies us at every level of generalist practice, from work with individuals to whole societies. We have a current example of the latter in our national political life. Our collective psyche has been dominated since September 11 by the jingoistic insistence that God is *on our side*: President Bush and other members of the Administration repeatedly proclaim to the public that God *will* support whatever *we* aim to do.

But in fact, however, the public holds us accountable to be *on God's side*, regardless of our personal spiritual and religious beliefs. We are held responsible as *social workers* to live up to humankind's nearly universal image of a higher power: we are to do good as God does good, we are to uphold truth as God upholds truth, we are to stand for justice as God stands for justice, we are to protect freedom as God protects freedom, we are to pursue peace as God pursues peace, and we are to show kindness as God shows kindness.

And our ability to respond in humankind's image of God, notwithstanding our differences, imposes common demands upon us as *citizens*: we must never harm the innocent, we must never prolong pain and suffering needlessly, we must never wantonly destroy—and we must hold our leaders accountable not to do any of these things in our name.

Click here for more faith-based community development and organizing social work tools.

© 2001 Moshe ben Asher & Khulda Bat Sarah.